

## **1998: A Most Significant Milestone, Fifteen Years of Distinguished Contributions to Cancer Research in New Jersey**

It is with a sense of great pride and accomplishment that the New Jersey Commission on Cancer Research (NJCCR) announces its fifteenth anniversary. Throughout its history, the Commission has sought to unite with members of the cancer community so that we might work together to bring New Jersey to the cutting edge in the fight against cancer and keep it there. As we look back, we can all be proud of the accomplishments that have been made. Gone are the days when patients left our state to receive treatments, because they were not available in New Jersey. Today, a growing network of outstanding hospitals and medical centers offer our citizens the most advanced care available. Excellence in basic laboratory research and a state-wide expectation that fosters technology transfer have generated an environment strongly supportive of innovative cancer research. Behavioral, psychosocial, and epidemiological research are expanding rapidly and collaboration has blossomed. New Jersey can stand with pride in the knowledge that it is emerging nationally as a leader in cancer research.

The New Jersey Commission on Cancer Research was created in 1983 with the signing of P.L. 83, C 6 to promote and fund significant, original research proposed and carried out by New Jersey scientists who are exploring the complexities of cancer. From their beginning, the Commission's activities have been characterized by the demand for scientific excellence in research design, the expectation of the highest standards of outcomes and the insistence on the equitable treatment of all its constituents. The major activity during these fifteen years has been the underwriting of research grants to eligible nonprofit institutions throughout the State, and cancer training fellowships for graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and summer interns.

It is important to recognize the Commission members themselves who have dedicated their time, energy, and knowledge to make the NJCCR successful. They have all shown a single-minded commitment to the goal of bringing to the citizens of NJ the benefits of a strong cancer research agenda. We congratulate all of them, past and present, for a job well done. At the same time, the Commission recognizes that much of the success gained in the past 15 years would not have occurred without the involvement of its network of supporters. There is no doubt, for example, that the work of its advisory groups has contributed significantly to the NJCCR's achievements. It is with heartfelt thanks and appreciation for their dedication and commitment that the Commission applauds their accomplishments.

Early on in its development, the Commission recognized that the only sure strategy for success was to invest in the most talented people. With this in mind, the Commission has consistently supported emerging research talent seeking to break into the competitive world of cancer research and senior investigators embarking on new research directions. The Commission uses an NIH system of scientific peer review in making its awards and this assures a rigorous and fair approach to all of its endeavors. To date, the Commission has awarded nearly \$13,907,569 to 208 scientists and \$4,018,117 for 163 training fellowships.

While the NJCCR offers relatively small seed grants, this controlled investment has been used effectively to leverage major grants from other funding sources. The Commission tracks the federal research monies generated from its grants and has found a return of three dollars in federal funds for every state dollar spent. Furthermore, NJCCR-supported researchers have credited this support for substantially assisting them in their career development. For example, Arnold Rabson, MD of the Center for Advanced Biotechnology and Medicine was studying HIV infection until a small grant from the NJCCR allowed him to launch successful studies into lymphoma and prostate cancer. Stephen Brill used his NJCCR award to attract a major NIH grant that allowed him to continue to expand his promising work on cancer genetics. Upon completing his predoctoral fellowship, Brian Elanbaas obtained a postdoctoral fellowship in the laboratory of Robert Weinberg at the Whitehead Institute at Harvard University where he will continue his training to become a leading breast cancer researcher. The NJCCR can look back with the satisfaction of knowing that its support of talented scientists has proved to be the basis of a successful strategy in New Jersey's efforts to become a leader in the fight against cancer.

Given its focus on collaboration, the Commission quite naturally reached out to the cancer community in New Jersey by offering workshops, symposia and other educational forums. The NJCCR sponsored its first Annual Workshop on Cancer Research in 1986 when it invited researchers throughout the state to share information on their work and explore possible collaborations. After eight annual workshops with this format, the Commission joined forces in 1996 with The Cancer Institute of New Jersey which had been supporting a similar program for its constituents and the Annual Retreat on Cancer Research in New Jersey was launched. This full day program brings together over 450 cancer researchers representing every research institution within New Jersey, and generating nearly 175 abstracts. It is now the largest scientific meeting in New Jersey. In addition, the Commission has co-sponsored a number of successful educational programs touching upon such important topics as cancer and the environment, cancer and economically disadvantaged populations, genetic testing and cancer risk, research models for oncology nursing, and most recently, cancer survivorship.

In the course of the past 15 years, the cancer community in New Jersey has faced a number of significant challenges that required its attention and consideration. As a leading member of this community, the Commission has shown its willingness and ability to work collaboratively with its partners in seeking solutions to these concerns whether it was the high statewide breast and prostate cancer rates, genetic privacy and discrimination, the improvement of informed consent procedures in clinical research, or health insurance coverage for cancer screening. Furthermore, the need to develop a strong cancer research infrastructure, including NCI designated cancer centers, together with the needs to formulate a statewide cancer control plan, to support a current and viable statewide cancer registry program, and to expand access to clinical research trials, have been constants on the Commission's agenda.

Of course, there are always those special achievements that serve to confirm everything else. One of these occurred in 1989, when the Commission was recognized as a model for all states by the President's Cancer Advisory Board. As a result, a number of states including Arizona, Colorado and Florida, have adopted similar programs. In 1995, another occurred when Governor Christine Todd Whitman signed into law the New Jersey Breast Cancer Research Fund, a

dedicated fund made possible by the inclusion of a check-off box on the state's income tax form to support research into the causes, early detection, treatment and prevention of breast cancer by New Jersey non-profit institutions. Yet another milestone was reached when the New Jersey Conquer Cancer License Plate was created in 1997 as the first specialty license plate dedicated to cancer research in the country . The license plate raised over \$200,000 for cancer research projects in New Jersey during its first year of existence.

While we acknowledge the significant progress that New Jersey has made in the war on cancer, we must not forget that cancer still takes an enormous toll on our citizens. Therefore, much remains to do as we look to the new millennium. During the past fifteen years, an estimated 625,000 New Jersey residents learned that they had cancer and over 280,000 died from this disease. Today, there are 275,000 cancer survivors living in the State of New Jersey. But while incidence and mortality rates continue to decline, they still remain above national levels.

The Commission is committed to doing all that it can to ensure that the people of New Jersey receive the full benefit of the state's campaign against cancer through its promotion of research into the causes, prevention and treatment of this disease. With this in mind, the Commission will continue to support strong basic science through its grants and fellowship program, assure access to the most advanced clinical care by increasing opportunities to participate in clinical trials, enhance the quality of life of cancer patients, fight to reduce the burden that cancer holds for our under-served populations, and strive to educate patients, their families and the public at large about new developments in cancer research.

As we stand on the verge of a new millennium and consider with well founded hope the positive prospects for our future, we can justifiably include the eradication of cancer among them. Consider where we were 30 years ago and where we are today! How could we not be optimistic? But just as the success of the past 30 years has come about through an unrelenting determination to conquer cancer, even in the face of set backs and dead ends, so the final phase of this campaign that awaits us will call for uncommon singleness of purpose, courage and generosity of spirit. These are the lessons of the Commission's past fifteen years of remarkable success. They are, as a consequence, conditions of the success of this final phase, if our beliefs in the efficacy of basic research is to be vindicated, and if our responsibility for the well being of New Jersey are to be met. To this end, we can find inspiration in all that the next millennium offers.